

Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

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AID-05 A-01 CCO-00 OC-06 OPR-02 CA-01 SCS-06

MCT-02 SY-05 CIAE-00 DODE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00

SSO-00 ICAE-00 INRE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03

PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 PC-01 EUR-12 MCE-00 FDRE-00

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FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9170

INFO USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN GER IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 ADDIS ABABA 3267

DEPT PASS HORN OF AFRICA COLLECTIVE

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MOPS, ET

SUBJ: COMMENTARY ON ETHIOPIAN MILITARY ADVANCES IN THE NORTH

REF: ADDIS ABABA 3265

SUMMARY: ETHIOPIAN ADVANCES ON THE NORTHERN FRONT ARE IMPRESSIVE. GAINS HAVE, HOWEVER, BEEN MADE AT THE EXPENSE OF ONLY ONE OF THE THREE ERITREAN SECESSIONIST GROUPS - THE ELF, WHICH MAY BE APPROACHING THE POINT OF DISSOLUTION FOR INTERNAL REASONS. THE HARDEST ERITREAN FORCES AND THE TOUGHEST TERRAIN HAVE NOT YET BEEN HIT BY THE ETHIOPIAN FORCES. THE POLITICAL ADVANTAGES FROM THE GAINS MADE ARE NOT YET SUFFICIENT TO PERMIT A CHANGE IN THE HARDLINE ETHIOPIAN POLICY OF SEEKING A MILITARY VICTORY. THE WAR IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE AND INTENSIFY. END SUMMARY.

1. THE CLAIMED MILITARY ADVANCES MADE BY THE ETHIOPIAN FORCES, REPORTED REFTEL, ARE LARGELY ACCURATE. THE ADVANCES
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ARE IMPRESSIVE. THEY WERE ACHIEVED DURING THE RAINY SEASON, WHICH LIMITS THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT'S USE OF AIR POWER AND ROADS AND NO FOREIGN COMBAT UNITS WERE INVOLVED. CUBAN AND SOVIET ADVISORS ARE ACTIVE IN THE ZONE OF OPERATIONS, BUT NOT PARTICIPATING IN THE FIGHTING.

2. THE ETHIOPIAN GAINS, IMPORTANT AS THEY ARE, ARE STILL

PRELIMINARIES AND ARE NOT DECISIVE. THE LARGEST ADVANCE IN DISTANCE (BY THE 501 TASK FORCE) WAS CONDUCTED IN FLAT COUNTRY ALONG THE SUDAN BORDER IS AN ATTEMPT TO CUT OFF SUPPLIES REACHING THE ERITREANS OVERLAND. IN THIS TERRAIN THE ETHIOPIAN FORCES HAVE AN OVERSHELMING ADVANTAGE IN NUMBERS AND IN THE USE OF MECHANIZED EQUIPMENT. IN THIS AREA THE ETHIOPIANS FACED ELF TROOPS, CONCERNING WHICH ORGANIZATION SEE PARA 3 AND 4 BELOW. THE ADVANCES BY THE JOINT 502 AND 503 TASK FORCES WHO TOOK ADI UGRI IN THE CENTRAL REGION WERE MADE AGAINST ELF, NOT EPLF, FORCES. THE ETHIOPIAN FORCES, HOWEVER, ARE NOW WITHIN 50 KM OF ASMARA. THE 505 TASK FORCE IN MASSAWA EXPANDED ITS PERIMETER SUFFICIENTLY TO SECURE THE AIRFIELD, WHICH WILL FACILITATE ITS RESUPPLY. THE AREA SURROUNDING MASSAWA IS FLAT, AND SHOULD BE RECAPTURED WITHOUT TOO MUCH DIFFICULTY BY ETHIOPIAN FORCES IN MASSAWA ONCE THEY ARE BUILT UP AND REINFORCED SUFFICIENTLY. THE HIGHLANDS, WHERE ETHIOPIAN FORCES LOSE MANY OF THEIR ADVANTAGES, BEGIN 20 KM WEST OF MASSAWA ON THE ROAD TO ASMARA. ON ALL FRONTS THE ERITREANS STILL APPEAR TO BE FIGHTING A CONVENTIONAL WAR OF UNITS. AS THEY ARE FORCED TO GIVE GROUND IN THE FACE OF PREPONDERANT ETHIOPIAN FORCE AND AS THEY RETREAT INTO THEIR WELL-KNOWN TERRAIN WHICH FAVORS GUERILLA TACTICS, THEIR STRATEGY CAN BE EXPECTED TO CHANGE.

3. THE INITIAL VICTORIES IN WESTERN ERITREA ANNOUNCED BY THE NATIONAL REVOLUTIONARY OPERATIONS COMMAND (NROC) WILL
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HAVE IMPACT OF HASTENING DISSOLUTION OF ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT (ELF) AND MAY IN SHORT TERM STRENGTHEN RESOLVE OF ERITREAN POPULAR LIBERATION FRONT (EPLF). RELIABLE SOURCES WITH DIRECT ACCESS TO ERITREAN SECESSIONIST LEADERS BELIEVE THAT ELF HAS BEEN LOSING SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF MEMBERS TO EPLF AND OSMAN SLAEH SABBE (ELF/PLF) GROUPS OVER PAST 2-3 MONTHS AND NO LONGER HAS ITS BEST TRAINED FIGHTERS IN FIELD. AFTER THE ETHIOPIAN VICTORY AT OM HAGER ON JULY 3/4, ELF BEGAN EVACUATING MAJORITY OF CIVILIANS FROM TESSENEI, ADI UGRI, MENDEFERA AND AGORDAT, ADDING TO PRESSURE ON REFUGEE CAMPS IN SUDAN. THE GROUP EVACUATED TO SUDAN FROM TESSENEI ALONE WAS ESTIMATED AT 5,000 PERSONS.

NOTE BY OC/T: NOT PASSED HORN OF AFRICA COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 ADDIS ABABA 3267

4. THE ELF MAY CEASE TO BE CREDIBLE GUERILLA
FORCE IN 2-3 MONTHS. THERE IS SOME SPECULATION
THAT THE ELF DEMISE WAS CALCULATED BY THE ETHIO-
PIANS EVENTUALLY TO FORCE THE EPLF TO NEGOTIATING
TABLE, UNBURDENED BY NEED TO PRESENT UNIFIED FRONT
WITH THE POLITICALLY INCOMPATIBLE ELF. THUS FAR
ALL ETHIOPIAN MILITARY VICTORIES, EXCEPT THE EPLF'S
ABANDONMENT OF ITS POSITIONS IN AND AROUND MASSAWA,
HAVE BEEN AGAINST ELF TERRITORY.

5. PERSONNEL GAINS FOR SABBE'S ELF/PLF SHOULD EN-
SURE INCREASED SAUDI ARABIAN SUPPORT. HOWEVER, THE
ELF/PLF DOES NOT YET REPRESENT SIGNIFICANT MILITARY
THREAT. THE ELF/PLF APPEARS TO BE OPERATING AWAY
FROM MAJOR ROADS AND TOWNS FOR THE PRESENT. IT IS
LIKELY THAT THE EPLF IS PREPARED FOR MILITARY CON-
FRONTATION AS ETHIOPIANS LEAVE LOWLAND AREAS, WHERE
THE ELF HAS BEEN OPERATING, AND ENTER HIGHLAND
PLATEAUS CONTROLLED BY EPLF. THE EPLF DOES NOT VIEW
ELF LOSSES AS MAJOR DAMAGE TO THEIR POSITIONS, AL-
THOUGH IT DOES INCREASE THEIR VULNERABILITY. THE
EPLF EXPECTS THAT AGORDAT WILL BE NEXT OBJECTIVE OF
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ETHIOPIAN FORCES AND THEN RELIEF OF THE ETHIOPIAN
GARRISON AT BARENTU, THE EPLF APPEARS TO BELIEVE THAT THE
ETHIOPIANS WILL BE SUCCESSFUL IN ATTAINING THESE
OBJECTIVES, AND IS PREPARED TO ACCEPT THESE
LOSSES.

6. THE NROC ANNOUNCEMENT OF A LONG SERIES OF

VICTORIES WAS PROBABLY PARTLY DESIGNED TO OFFSET MANY REPORTS CIRCULATING IN ADDIS ABABA THAT THE HOSPITALS WERE OVERFLOWING WITH WOUNDED AND THAT CERTAIN SCHOOLS AND HOUSES HAD BEEN REQUISITIONED AS MAKESHIFT HOSPITALS (PROBABLY TRUE). ANNOUNCEMENT OF THESE VICTORIES ALSO MAY SERVE TO ENCOURAGE THE CIVILIAN POPULATION OF ADDIS ABABA WHICH IS SUFFERING INCREASINGLY SEVERE FOOD AND OTHER SHORTAGES WITH THE PROSPECT OF BETTER TIMES AFTER FINAL VICTORY WHICH BY IMPLICATION MAY BE NOW BE IN SIGHT. A SUFFICIENT STRING OF VICTORIES (AND THOSE REPORTED TO DATE ARE NOT ENOUGH) MIGHT PERMIT PMAC CHAIRMAN MENGISTU TO TEMPER HIS PRESENT HARD LINE POLICY TOWARDS ERITREA AND OFFER A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT BETTER THAN THE ERITREAN-REJECTED "NINE POINTS", WHICH HAS BEEN HIS LAST OFFER FOR TWO YEARS. OF COURSE, TO ACHIEVE A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT, THE ERITREANS WOULD HAVE TO BE WILLING TO SETTLE FOR SOMETHING LESS THAN INDEPENDENCE. TO DATE, TWO OF THE THREE SIGNIFICANT ERITREAN FORCES HAVE BARELY BEEN TOUCHED BY THE ETHIOPIANS AND CCERTAINLY NOT MAULED TO THE POINT OF CHANGIN THEIR GOALS.

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